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Palestinians prefer a coalition government over new elections

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A majority of Palestinians don't think new elections are the solution to the political crisis between Fatah and the Hamas government. More than half (54%) of those asked in an opinion poll conducted by Fafo say that they would prefer a new national unity coalition government over new elections. The suggestion of new elections received the support of one in five (21%) of those asked. At the same time, confidence that the sitting Hamas government can solve the crisis alone is very low (7%).

The poll data provides little grounds to believe elections would solve the present crisis. The same balance of support was found in the poll for Fatah and Hamas as before the last elections in January 2006: 54 % for Fatah today, 46 % in December 2005, while Hamas received 32 % support today, compared with 21 % at the same time last year. In addition, almost a third of respondents indicated that they would not vote in a new election (28%).

People's living conditions have worsened significantly over 2006 following the suspension of assistance to the Palestinian Authority. Barely a fifth of respondents reported they were employed. The economic situation in Gaza is particularly difficult and a majority (61%) of respondents from Gaza indicate they do not have the financial means to meet their basic needs over the coming three months.

Three quarters (77%) of respondents support new peace talks with Israel, but the demands of the government by key donor countries are only partially supported: slightly more than one quarter believe the government should recognise Israel and renounce violence against Israel. More than half (58%) believe the Hamas government should accept earlier agreements made by the PLO.

One third of those asked (35%) believe that Palestinian society is heading for civil war.

Fafo conducted the opinion poll in the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza between 25 November and 5 December 2006, with 1,960 respondents above 18 years of age. The research is intended to provide information on people's living conditions, as well as their views on domestic political issues, elections, war and peace. Financial support for the opinion poll has been provided by the Foreign Ministry of Norway.

Attitudes towards political actors and the political crisis

51% believe that President Abbas is doing a good job. 23% believe that he is doing a very bad job.

52% believe Prime Minister Hanniya is doing a good job, while 27% believe he is doing a very bad job. Hanniya has stronger support in Gaza (59%) than in the West Bank (48 %).

People are generally dissatisfied with the government's performance. 80% are dissatisfied with the economic policy, 83% with the security policy, 83% with the domestic policy and 82% with the government's policy towards Israel.

29% believe that the current government is doing a better job than their predecessor, while 23% think that they are equal in terms of performance.

Most of the respondents think that Israel (42%) and the international community (24%) are to blame for the crisis between the government and the President. Considerably fewer, 14% and 15% respectively, believe that the government or the President themselves are causing the crisis. Even fewer, 11%, believe that the Hamas leadership in Damascus is the main cause of the political crisis.

The population is divided in their opinion upon whether Fatah or Hamas are to blame for the conflict between the Palestinian factions.

27% hold Fatah responsible, and the same percentage believes Hamas has the main responsibility for the problems. 30 % reply that they do not know and 9% refused to answer the question. While people in the West Bank to a larger extent think Fatah is to blame (29%), the majority of those that answered the question in Gaza hold Hamas responsible (34%). 7% believe there are other Palestinian fractions that has the main responsibility for the conflict.

Around 80% think that a new coalition government could improve the security situation, and the economic and political conditions. 90% believe that it would contribute to restore the development aid to the Palestinian areas.

Only 9% believe strongly that there will be a civil war within the Palestinian community, while another 24% believe that this may happen.

More Fatah- than Hamas-supporters believe there will be a civil war (42% vs. 23%). The Hamas-supporters in the Gaza Strip find a civil war less likely than the Hamas-supporters in the West Bank. Beyond that, there are no major regional differences.

As a solution to the internal political crisis, 21% believe that there should be a new election, while 54% (50% in the West Bank and 60% in Gaza) believe a coalition government should be established. 10% think that a referendum should decide whether a new election is to take place, while 7% believe that the best solution to the crisis is to keep the current Hamas government.

38% believe that Hamas is divided in two fractions. 63% think that the Hamas leadership in Damascus has most influence on the government, while 16% believe that Iran most influence.

One of the major reasons why Hamas won the January election, was the problem of corruption in the previous Fatah-led government. Only 6% feel that Hamas has succeeded in their fight against corruption, while an additional 23% think that the government has succeeded to some extent. 38% believe that government has been very unsuccessful in their fight against corruption.

While 15% think that President is the most responsible for the security situation in Palestine, 22% put the blame on government. 57% believe that Israel holds the main responsibility for the lack of security, while 11% believe that the main responsibility is with the international community.

Most people still expect the national security institutions to take responsibility for law and order. 54% think that the police have the main responsibility to maintain law and order in the streets, while 31% believe this is the responsibility of the national guards. Only 11% believe it is the responsibility of the newly established Executive Forces.

However, there is general lack of trust in the main security services on both sides of the present internal crisis. People have very low trust in the security services associated with the previous government (Fatah) and the present President. Only 6% have high trust and 26% somewhat high trust in the security services, while 26% have absolutely no trust in them at all. The present (Hamas) government's security forces (Executive Forces) don't fare much better: 10% have high trust and 18% somewhat high trust in, while 41 % have absolutely no trust in them at all.

Political parties are the least trusted public institutions of all. Only 6% say they have high trust and 16% somewhat high trust in the political parties. The trust in Parliament (37%), the juridical system (34%) and the Palestinian NGOs (33%) are also modest. UNRWA is the institution in which people have most trust. 29% have a high degree of trust in UNRWA while additional 38% have somewhat high trust in the UN-organization offering health-, education- and social services to the internally displaced. 33% believe that the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons is the most important political issue. Second in importance is the resumption of peace talks with Israel and improvements in the economic conditions (both 19%). 3 % have trust in CNN and 4% in BBC, while 86% and 84% respectively have absolutely no trust in these news channels. Al Jaziraa on the other hand is highly respected, 87 % have trust in the news from this channel.

Elections

If there were to be arranged a new election for a Palestinian parliament, 71% respond that they would have participated in the election. Among these 54% replied that they would vote for Fatah and 32% for Hamas.

48% believe that a new election would improve the situation in Palestine, while 16% believes the situation would deteriorate.

The most likely candidate for the presidency if there was to be a new election is according to 26% of the respondents the current president Abbas, while 21% would vote for the sitting Prime Minister Hanniya. Marwan Barghouti, who is still in jail in Israel, is seen as the best candidate by 14% of the respondents.

Living conditions

Only 20% of the population worked the week before being interviewed (35% men and 6% women). 38% of the population on the West Bank were working, while the corresponding numbers from Gaza Strip is 29%

72% of the population report a decrease in personal income over last year. Income has decreased for 68% of the population of the West Bank and for 81% in Gaza. Perhaps surprisingly, 53% of the population expect improved living conditions next year.

45% do not expect to be able to cover their primary needs the next three months if the economic situation remains unchanged.

87% of the children and youth from 5 to 18 and 97% of those between 10 and 14 are currently enrolled in school. 44% of the children had been absent from school during the week before being interviewed.

War and peace

77% believe that negotiations with Israel should resume (79% of the respondents on the West Bank and 74% in Gaza).

The release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons is seen as the most important factor for a new peace process by 37% of the respondents. The end of Israeli aggression in Gaza and Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank are the second most important demands (both 15%). Then 11% ranks reconciliation between the government and the president as the most central factor.

While 82% of the respondents believe all military force against Israel should cease immediately, 84% still believe the military force is legitimate under the current circumstances.

21% believe that the release of the soldier Shalit will end the Israeli incursions into Gaza. At the same time 45% believes that the hostage taking has been beneficial for the Palestinians and only 9% support an unconditional release.